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Yale French Studies, No. 79, Literature and the Ethical Question (1991), 15-19.

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Yale French Studies

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GEORGES BATAILLE

Reflections on the Executioner and the Victim*

David Rousset, *Les Jours de notre mort* (*The Days of Our Death*), novel,*
Edition du Pavois, 1947, in-8°, 787 pages, "Le Chemin de la vie" (series
directed by Maurice Nadeau).

"In the four weeks that we were away from Helmstedt, we'd been to the extreme limit of ruin. The structure of the camps had ripped apart and the men had broken all the dams. Me, us, everyone. Of what we learned in abjection, it will never be spoken. As we are now, miserable and frightening, we carry with us, despite it all, with us and beyond us, a triumph for the entire community of mankind. We never gave up the fight, we never repudiated a thing. We never blasphemed against life . . ." (760).

*"This book is structured like a novel." Discovering no doubt in novelistic techniques a richer means of expression and a subordination of language to life that were not at the disposal of a historian, the author specifies, however: "Fabrication has no part in this work. The facts, the events, the persons are all real. It would have been silly to invent when the truth so exceeded the imaginary." We know that David Rousset published *L'Univers concentrationnaire* (*The Universe of the Concentration Camp* which we acknowledged previously: *Critique*, n°5, October 1946, 441) as an introduction to this big book, in which he sets forth the central themes which he would later expound in the tangled, dense narrations of *Les Jours de notre mort*. The

*This text is drawn from *Oeuvres complètes* of Georges Bataille, *Ecrits posthumes 1922–1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), vol. 2, 143 [translator's note]. With the permission of Gallimard.

YFS 79, *Literature and the Ethical Question*, ed. Claire Nouvet, © 1991 by Yale University.

criticism, misreading perhaps the ambiguity in the subtitle "novel," dwells on the overwriting and the repetition in the narrations: in principle the criticism represents the "normal world" that requires respect for the convention that founds it, even as another voice reaches it from "another world," the other voice founded upon the very rupture of that convention. Let us say that the overwriting and the repetition help us to hear this other voice, exactly as it may be, voice to which David Rousset has given strength and severity. This book is already a discovery for us of the ground (and needless to say, of the muck) from which humanity rises.

If an extreme possibility has been given to life, not in the furtive time of normal death, but in the endless repetition that the addition of hundreds upon thousands of prolonged agonies offers to it, it is surely for this possibility that David Rousset became a memorialist. He describes the singularity of his experience: forced to observe, he nonetheless remained a guinea pig. And at the end one observes that the guinea pig triumphantly claims victory over life put to the test, by looking death and calamity in the eye.

*

But the insolent conclusion of Rousset's book does not remove from his experience its value as a negating contention: "Never," are we told, "will normal people be able to understand. They live at the surface. And not only of social conventions. But of other conventions even more profound. And unsuspected. The conventions upon which the most intimate life tolerates itself. To say to them: the truth is that both the victim and the executioner were ignoble; that the lesson of the camps is fraternity in abjection; that if *you* did not conduct yourself with the same degree of ignominy, it was only because time was lacking and the conditions were not altogether ripe; that there only exists, in the decomposition of beings, a difference of rhythm; that the slowness of the rhythm is the attribute of great men; and that the mould, there beneath it all, rises and rises and rises, is absolutely, hideously the same thing. Who would believe it? Especially when the survivors will no longer know it. They too will invent rose-tinted images" (587–88).

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In truth it is not the author who speaks but a prisoner whose meditation he relates: " . . . A great farce. His own, definitive way of reducing it to nothingness;" such is according to Rousset the conclusion of the wretched man who in the final moment prefers poison to torture. But nothing is clear. And it seems to me that searching the depths of reflection for a thought possible in the mind of Pröll, who is about to die, the author comes against a fundamental difficulty: never can we *establish* a limit once a man advances far into suffering; he cannot *be assured* that a barrier which resisted in the past will not be broken. And what precisely can be admired in the event of a trial survived and in the victory of life is that life, discovering itself to be in the

hands of horror and knowing itself to be at the mercy of physical affliction, nonetheless *insures* its successful outcome by the excess of its steadfastness in the face of filth. Yet in a universe of suffering, of baseness and of stench, every one, at his *leisure*, could measure the abyss, the absence of limit to the abyss, and the truth that obsesses and fascinates.

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One of David Rousset's most surprising reactions is exaltation, almost euphoria at the idea of participating in an insane experiment. Nothing more virile, nothing more *healthy*. The depths of horror—on the one hand the suffering and the degradation that it entails, and on the other hand the vile cruelty of the executioner and its unleashing of a beyond of infinite possibility—the depths of horror presents itself to human beings as the truth to discover. In other words, it is necessary for man to learn, beyond his normal state, the faraway limit of the possible. But he must pay the price . . .

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But he who retreats and does not want to see is hardly a man: he has chosen as a foundation not to know what he is. In a sense he does know: he turns away! But he *does not want* to know it. This negation of humanity is barely less degrading than is that of the executioner. The executioner demeans himself, demeans his victim; especially as he strikes in a cowardly manner, in ignorance (no one, if he is not *inhuman*, can effectively reduce himself to a state of blind nature; a torturer is *ignorant* of the fact that he strikes himself: he adds to the suffering of his victim the annihilation of the idea of humanity). But a *kind soul* is even more cowardly and doubtless more dangerous; his failing extends that laughable region where humanity undoes itself, is naught but error and vanity, and asserts parrotlike inanities.

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Horror obviously is not the truth; it is but an infinite possibility, the limit of which is death (the scope of death—it sets a term to pain—give pain a final and inordinate sense; death remains impossible in us until the end; it suppresses all possibles other than pain and, insofar as death limits pain, it evades consciousness). But man is made up of possible abjection, his joy, of potential pain; and if the abjection and the pain were ever to reveal themselves fully to him by any means, it would be a ragdoll disguised as a man, a Pharisee, a clown or an old maid, any false and chattering affect benumbing the remorse of a failing.

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Nausea is not what reveals things to us, but the world is only given to us in a restrained nausea.

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If one were to remove from us this particular domain—the possibility of pain—the world would consist of *Charlottes* and *Gustaves* of whom one would no longer laugh. But pain is always there for us, and our disgust for it

defines us. And the knowledge of possible pain *humanizes*: it is pain that makes one so tender and so hard, so gay and so heavy with silence.

(Thus David Rousset marks exactly the point at which humanity fulfills itself, surviving the test without hatred and without complaints, with as much humor as lucidity.)

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The worst aspect of the sufferings of the inmates is not the pain endured but the pain furiously desired by others. Pain resulting from sickness or accidents does not seem as horrible; the depths of horror is in the will of those who command it. A world in which many individuals suffer great pain but in which the common goal was to fight pain would be soothing. Degradation, ignominy, cowardliness multiplied—destroying little by little the fortress that reason is at the root of the civilized world—disturb us more violently than does raw suffering.

The difference, however, concerns the suffering of the victim less than our own suffering. We are far more threatened when the barriers that opposed reason and order to cruelty give way.

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But that is not all.

We cannot be *human* until we have perceived in ourselves the possibility for abjection in addition to the possibility for suffering. We are not only possible victims of the executioners, the executioners are our fellow-creatures. We must ask ourselves: is there anything in our nature that renders such horror impossible? And we would be correct in answering: no, nothing. A thousand obstacles in us rise against it. . . . Yet it is not impossible. Our possibility is thus not simply pain, it extends to the rage of the torturer. The Toni Brunckens, the Heinzes, the Popenhauers, so many killers in combat boots with bludgeons, all cowardly and unrelenting, are there to tell us with their irrefutable rage that often cowardliness alone is the limit to violence and that there is no limit to cowardliness.

And how could we not see, in the most unpleasant silence, that such a potential simply remains the farthest away, the most inconceivable also, but *ours* without a doubt? Nothing in us can be isolated, can be safely put aside in order to say firmly that it would have been impossible, no matter what. No matter what? What we are, depended on circumstances that might have been different, that might have been, for example, those of which Toni Bruncken was the end result.

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It is clear that life cannot be reduced to the absurd, although man's potential oversteps the limits of reason in all directions. A chain of reasonable acts is one potential sequence among others and the man whom reason enlightens always perceives in himself, at once, the reasonable and beyond, but always in himself, which puts the reasonable in question.

It is the essence of reason to be contestable, but of the essence of contention to be an effect of reason. At the limit, reason becomes an insoluble question for itself and it might then seem as if it gives in to the absurd of its own accord. But such is not the case if one wishes to see more lucidly (perhaps also painfully). The absurd cannot destroy the reasonable because reason brings about in and of itself that which the irrational does from the outside: its own endless questioning. This is precisely where man prevails over negation: he does not prevail in a decisive victory, after which rest and sleep would be granted him; he prevails by way of the doubt that *awakening* is.

Only what would this awakening be if it only illuminated a world of abstract possibilities? If it did not awake first to the possibility of Auschwitz, to the potential for stench and unalleviated fury?

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There exists in a certain form of moral condemnation an escapist denial. One says, basically, this abjection would not have been, had there not been monsters. In judging so violently, one subtracts the monsters from the possible. One implicitly accuses them of exceeding the limit of the possible instead of seeing that their excess, precisely, defines this limit. And it is possible, insofar as this language appeals to the masses, that this infantile negation may seem effective; but in the end it changes nothing. It would be as vain to deny the incessant danger of cruelty as it would be to deny the danger of physical pain. One hardly obviates its effects flatly attributing it to parties or to races which one imagines to be inhuman.

*

And, needless to say, an awakening that requires a relentless consciousness of the possible horror is more than a means of avoiding it (or at the final moment of facing it). The *awakening* begins with humor, with poetry also. (And not the least meaning of Rousset's book is that it affirm humor too and that the nostalgia which emanates from it, never one of sated happiness, be that of movements drunk with poetry.)¹

Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg

1. Under no circumstances do I pretend, having proposed to start from the extremes of reflection, to have exhausted a work which is, in reality, a universe. Rousset's forthcoming book *Lazare ressuscité* (*Lazarus Risen*) will discuss the return from this other world to the normal world. How could the somber and unparalleled experience of the camps not have challenged all notions? It is in every way and incessantly that one should return to it.